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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CODEL ORTIZ VISIT TO ROMANIA
FEBRUARY 19-20

¶1. (SBU) Embassy Bucharest warmly welcomes you to Romania, and is eager for you to tour what will soon be the US-Romanian forward operating facilities in Constanta. President Traian Basescu has championed a strong strategic partnership with the United States, committing Romania to a trans-Atlantic foreign policy focus to match its recent membership in the European Union. In fact, the US-Romanian partnership in the security and defense field is second to none. Romania is one of our staunchest allies in the global war on terrorism and in international peace support operations, providing troops and strategic airlift in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Balkans. It also prides itself on its participation in NATO's Operation Active Endeavor and various UN missions throughout Africa.

¶2. (SBU) The joint use of the Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base and the 34th Mechanized Infantry Battalion base that you will be visiting was made possible by the bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement signed by Secretary Rice and Foreign Minister Ungureanu in December 2005. It was a landmark event in our relationship, and set the stage for still more cooperation in the future. Romanian Defense Minister Frunzaverde just completed a trip to Washington where he had a series of very productive meetings with Defense, State and NSC officials. Your visit is another opportunity to underscore the importance of the US-Romanian partnership in helping build cooperation and promote Euro-Atlantic values in the Black Sea region. Romania's National Security Strategy aims at promoting greater U.S. and NATO strategic involvement in the Black Sea region, which represents in Bucharest's eyes a zone of potential instability, ranging from the so-called "frozen conflicts" to trafficking in drugs, persons and weapons. Romania is traditionally also interested in counterbalancing Moscow's influence in its neighborhood; President Basescu and other Romanian officials have spoken out forcefully in recent months about Europe's need to diversify its energy supplies and open the door to various "Southern Corridor" projects that traverse Romania and other countries in the region.

¶3. (SBU) While the US and Romania continue to advance the partnership both within NATO and in other initiatives, like the Global Peace Support Operations Initiative and the Proliferation Security Initiative, the domestic political scene has been particularly tumultuous of late. The center-right coalition government has been hamstrung by sharp conflicts between President Basescu and Prime Minister Tariceanu. The two leaders' accusations and counter-accusations of corruption, influence peddling, and oligarchic tendencies have become more volatile since the country's EU accession in January. Not all of their dust-ups have been limited to domestic issues. Last June, for

instance, the Prime Minister, pushed by radicals in his Liberal Party who sought to embarrass Basescu, announced a plan to withdraw Romanian troops from Iraq without consulting the President or Romania's allies. While Basescu and Defense Minister Frunzaverde have confirmed Romania will continue to meet its commitments in Iraq, some Liberals still hope to foster a parliamentary debate over Romania's troop deployments.

14. (SBU) Taking advantage of the volatile rhetoric within the governing coalition, the opposition Social Democrats on February 12, filed a motion to suspend President Basescu for 30 days on grounds of constitutional abuse of office, with the aim of removing him from office permanently in a subsequent referendum. There are apparently sufficient opposition votes in Parliament to make the threat a real one.

Part of Basescu's political problems are self-made; he was described famously by one opposition politician as "a lone wolf" and his style is direct and confrontational. At the same time, he retains a level of popular support that is unmatched by any other single politician. It remains to be seen whether he can face down both his critics within the governing alliance (including a Prime Minister who has considerable authority as the head of government) and his diehard opponents in Parliament on both the right and the left. The same configuration of center-left politicians from the last government, former Communists, right-wing nationalists and regional "barons" are trying to unseat the Minister of Justice, whose efforts to fight corruption and reform the judiciary have earned plaudits both in Brussels and in Washington.

15. (SBU) Just a month after its entry into the European Union, Romania is facing the prospect of months of uncertainty and instability that could raise anew questions about the country's readiness to move beyond its legacy of

BUCHAREST 00000168 002 OF 002

post-Communist, oligarchic business and political interactions. The good news is that, for the moment, there is still broad acceptance in the political class and among Romanians as a whole, in the importance of Romania's strategic partnership with the U.S. Also, the current political instability has stayed within legal and constitutional bounds, however torrid the rhetoric and vivid the theatrics. Meanwhile, we have emphasized that while we cannot comment on the constitutional debate itself, it is important that the political issues be worked out democratically, transparently and responsibly. Likewise, Romania must continue to build on the progress it has made in recent years in fighting corruption and strengthening the rule of law. Nor would we welcome a turn of events politically which would leave irresponsible actors like the extremist head of the "Greater Romania" Party in a position to benefit from the crisis. With one of the fastest growing economies in Europe, a talented workforce, and a strategic location on the Eastern rim of both NATO and the EU, Romania has a lot of positives with which to work, if only its political class can overcome its reliance on selfish, zero-sum politics.

TAUBMAN